KCRW

- Listen Live
- Donate
- KCRW Live
- Eclectic 24
- News 24
- All Streams
- All Streams
- Music
- News
- Culture
- Shows
- Playlist
- Schedule

- Playlist
- Schedule
- Donate

FEATURES

KCRW

Podcast

Listen 5 min

KCRW Features

SoCal's COVID-cautious: Fighting isolation along with the virus

By Danielle Chiriguayo May. 01, 2024 Coronavirus

Listen 5 min MORE

Being COVID-cautious is different for everyone, from masking up to assessing risk. Graphic by Gabby Quarante/KCRW.

It's 7 a.m. when I meet Abby Mahler at her Mid-City apartment. She loads up her car with the cargo that she's about to drive more than 50 miles round-trip to deliver — more than 100 masks and dozens of COVID tests.

"We're going to make a big circle," Mahler explains. "We're going to go up to the San Fernando Valley over to Eagle Rock, and then back down through Mid-City to where we are now."

Despite the chilly morning weather, Mahler rolls down the windows of her white Honda Fit. We're both wearing masks. A rechargeable air purifier blasts away in the cup holder.

"We are cleaning the air between us by allowing it to move and by filtering what we in-and-exhale," she points out. "We hedge our bets around here. I'm not just raw-dogging the air."

Mahler makes these Odyssian treks across Southern California every month. It's part of her work with Mask Bloc LA, a volunteer group dedicated to getting COVID tests and masks into the hands of Angelenos — all free of charge.

Abby Mahler films a TikTok while loading her car to distribute masks and COVID tests around Los Angeles. Photo by Danielle Chiriguayo.

The grassroots group is one of several that have popped up in LA and Southern California, united around one goal: to mitigate the spread of COVID. They're extensions of a global community of cautious folks continuing to take proactive steps to prevent infection in a post-pandemic world where others seem to no longer care about the virus.

Being COVID-cautious is different for everyone, from how much protective gear they wear to what risks they're willing to take. Some folks remain vigilant because they've already caught the virus and know the damage it causes. Others, however, are among the nearly 1 in 4 U.S. adults and older teens who the CDC estimates have never had COVID — and they want or need to keep it that way.

A free mask table set up by Mask Bloc LA. Photo by Abby Mahler.

Mahler, 30, is at high risk of developing a serious COVID infection. She was diagnosed with lupus — a chronic autoimmune disease — after graduating from college. Accordingly, she can't afford to gamble and is taking every precaution she can to avoid catching the virus.

"It's incredible that it hasn't happened to me yet. It is truly despite all odds," Mahler says. "I do intend to remain infection-free as long as possible, but when my time comes … I already had that conversation with my doctor about which medications I'm going to need."

In addition to advocating for herself, Mahler feels a responsibility to bring visibility and insight to the challenges that the COVID-cautious community continues to face.

When she isn't working or doing freelance photography, Mahler takes to online platforms like X and TikTok to connect with other COVID-cautious individuals and raise awareness around masking, testing, as well disinformation and conspiracies about the virus.

"If I can show what we are doing in our community, then others have the ability to see how they can create safety for themselves and they can dream of something more," she says.

"It's incredible that it hasn't happened to me yet. It is truly despite all odds," says Mahler, pictured in her car with an air filter en route to supply deliveries. Photo by Danielle Chiriguayo.

Mahler went viral in August 2023 when she shared a "what's in my bag" video detailing the items she took to Taylor Swift's Eras Tour. It was her first concert since 2020, and she packed accordingly: friendship bracelets, extra masks, and a CO2 monitor, which tracks how well-ventilated a space is.

Others, like 28-year-old Raleigh, believe that remaining COVID-cautious is simply a duty to their communities (Raleigh's last name is withheld due to concerns it could affect his employment).
Raleigh is healthy, but he continues to wear a mask wherever he goes.

"If COVID went away completely, I would still mask in public places because I don't want people to catch the flu," he says. "And I don't want to let them catch other diseases. I want to provide a safe world for them. There are tons of people who are immunocompromised. There are tons of people who are elderly and kids."

He continues, "The diseases would be a lot worse for them than … for me and I think that's enough. I don't worry about a day where I will never have to mask in the grocery store again."

Raleigh's choices, however, have created tension between him and his Orange County neighbors. He says that he and his partner are regularly harassed for wearing face coverings, including one neighbor whose behavior has gotten him in trouble with their apartment complex's management.

"He called me the B-word," Raleigh says of the confrontation. "He was obviously trying to fight me. He was putting his arms out. He was basically making a 'come at me' gesture. He got between me and the car, and I moved away and did not fight him — because why would I want to?"

He continues, "It comes at a cost. But if more people were masked, I feel like it wouldn't."

Raleigh's own family doesn't understand why he continues to take precautions: "They seem to think I'm going through some sort of mental health crisis just for the fact that I mask in the first place, and I just want to make it clear that it's not the case. My family doesn't seem to recognize that because they think that a mask is the important part [and] that I won't be fully happy until I move past it."

Fiona Lowenstein avoids COVID because of their own bitter experience with it. In March 2020, they were hospitalized for the virus. That led to years of living with long COVID, which came with debilitating symptoms that led to extensive isolation at home. Since discovering the COVID-cautious community online, Lowenstein has been able to forge new, real-life connections and friendships based on similar values.

Read more: Long COVID: Millions have it. Why do we still know so little?

"I live a really full life because of the community of COVID-cautious people that I know here," they say. "I'm able to go out, have a night out with six or seven other people who I know are going to be masked at the club, who I know are going to be seeking out outdoor events with me or events where masks are required."

Lowenstein's pandemic experience with isolation — and finding community in online spaces — led them to form We Are The Wayside. The local COVID-cautious group meets monthly at Echo Park, where attendees hang out, share the latest COVID wastewater data, and share space, all in-person and fully masked.

The group's name refers to a 2023 BBC interview with Dr. Anthony Fauci about the risk COVID still posed. "Even though you'll find the vulnerable will fall by the wayside, they'll get infected, they'll get hospitalized, and some will die — it's not going to be this tsunami of cases that we've seen," Fauci said.

Lowenstein says those falling by the "wayside" have been abandoned by society at large. For them, there is no "just living" with COVID. "We didn't learn to live with the risk of car crashes by not incorporating seatbelts. We didn't learn to live with the risks associated with smoking by allowing smoking in every space and everyone of every age to smoke, right?"

"I live a really full life because of the community of COVID-cautious people that I know here," says Fiona Lowenstein, [second from the left], pictured with friends at a birthday party. Photo courtesy of Fiona Lowenstein.

Like Lowenstein, Sara Johnson has experienced the pain COVID can wreak on the human body. The 46-year-old has a history of fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis, and she had a treatment plan ready for the day she caught the virus in 2022. Johnson recovered, but the symptoms of long COVID crept up, including shooting nerve pain, chronic fatigue, and brain fog.

"As someone who has lived through 9/11, floods, fires, blizzards, blackouts, a home invasion … long COVID is by far the worst thing I have ever been through," she says. "It is as bad as people describe it. I have described it as feeling like I've been poisoned. Being in different shades of living dead. I mean, it can't be overstated. That's not hyperbole. It feels that bad."

Johnson is mostly housebound, and up until a few months ago, was too fatigued by her illness to shower and dress on a daily basis. If she has the energy, she'll try walking around her neighborhood or attending the occasional Wayside meeting. Her world, though, has gotten a lot smaller in comparison to pre-pandemic days.

“It is only, I would say, in the past month or six weeks, I shower and dress on a regular daily basis,” says Sara Johnson, pictured here at Dockweiler Beach. “For two years, I did not do that. Because to do that was too tiring.” Photo by Abby Mahler.

“With the energy that you have, what are you going to do with it?” she asks herself. “You might feed yourself. You might call your doctor. You might make sure that you refill your prescription. You're just taking it day by day and doing the best that you can.”

As a person who's been disabled by COVID, Johnson feels disconnected, unable to relate to a world where people no longer seem to care about the virus.

“It's hard to find the vocabulary around this kind of conversation, but a lot of people are describing it as a health privilege,” she says. “When you think that you'll get COVID and you'll be fine, that's your health privilege. It's ‘what happened to somebody won't happen to you,’ right?”

Hey! Did you enjoy this piece? We can't do it without you. We are member-supported, so your donation is critical to KCRW's music programming, news reporting, and cultural coverage. Help support the DJs, journalists, and staff of the station you love.

Here's how:

- Sign-up for our newsletters.
- Become a KCRW member.
- Subscribe to our Podcasts.
- Donate to KCRW.
- Download our App.

Credits

Producers:

Sonya Geis, Andrea Domanick

Reporter:

Danielle Chiriguayo

More from KCRW Features

Long COVID: Millions have it. Why do we still know so little? KCRW Features Monday

Cannabis is akin to Tylenol with codeine? DEA wants reclassification KCRW Features Today

Will the 'Caitlin Clark effect' boost LA Sparks ticket sales? KCRW Features Monday

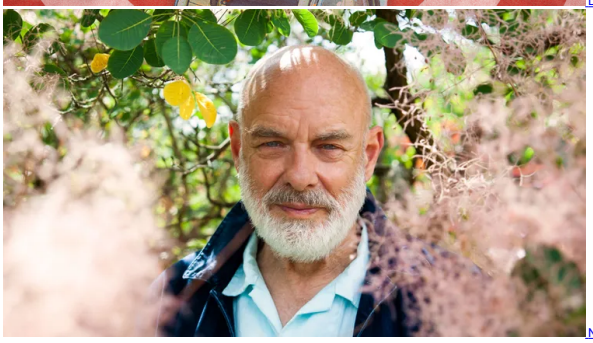
'Spin the wheel' with Cal State LA's game show curriculum KCRW Features Saturday

Latest

Is Trader Joe's stealing food ideas from small producers? Press Play with Madeleine Brand Yesterday

Congrats to the James Beard 2024 Media Award Nominees Good Food Yesterday

Long COVID: Millions have it. Why do we still know so little? KCRW Features Monday

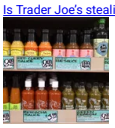

New Brian Eno film comes in 'a couple billion potential versions' Press Play with Madeleine Brand Monday

Share your passion for new experiences, sounds, & ideas

Get Involved

Featured

Is Trader Joe's stealing food ideas from small producers? Press Play with Madeleine Brand


Long COVID: Millions have it. Why do we still know so little? KCRW Features

Amid US campus protests, can Dartmouth offer a different path? Press Play with Madeleine Brand

Justice Department recommends loosening marijuana restrictions Press Play with Madeleine Brand

5 Things To Do Newsletter

The best of what to see, hear, eat, do, and more.

Enter Your Email*

BY SIGNING UP, YOU ACKNOWLEDGE AND AGREE TO KCRW'S TERMS OF USE AND PRIVACY POLICY.

Subscribe

Upcoming Events

May 4

The Music Center

The Music Center's On the Record: Vinyl Fair

May 4 Jerry Moss Plaza at The Music Center

HOW DO YOU GROW A ROSE FROM CONCRETE?
Thursday, May 9, 6-8 PM PDT Crenshaw High School | 5010 11th Ave | Los Angeles, CA 90043
Gabrielle Bullock
Principal and Director of Global Diversity, Perkins&Will
Marqueece Harris-Dawson
Los Angeles City Council President Pro Tempore
V. Joy Simmons
Senior Art and Exhibition Advisor, Destination Crenshaw

May 9

Zócalo Public Square and Destination Crenshaw

Zócalo Public Square and Destination Crenshaw: How Do You Grow a Rose from Concrete?

May 9 Crenshaw High School

View All

KCRW KCRW-FM NPR
89.9 FM

- About KCRW
- Contact
- Careers
- Help / FAQ
- Support KCRW
- Events
- Become a Sponsor
- Terms of Service
- Privacy Policy
- FCC Public Files
- FCC Applications
- EEO Report
- Pledge for Equity

© 2024 KCRW All Rights Reserved. Made in L.A.
Download on the App store Get it on Google Play Just ask Alexa
FACEBOOK INSTAGRAM YOUTUBE

Stay informed without getting overwhelmed!

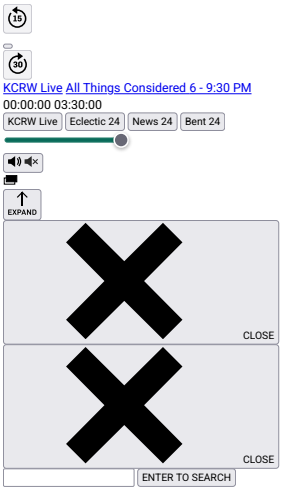
Enter Your Email*

Get the latest from KCRW in your inbox 3x a week.

All Things Considered 6 - 9:30 PM
May 1, 2024 3 hr 30 mins Hosted by

National Public Radio's weekday afternoon newsmagazine.

Read More
00:00:00 03:30:00


KCRW Live All Things Considered 6 - 9:30 PM
00:00:00 03:30:00
KCRW Live
Eclectic 24
News 24
Bent 24
EXPAND
CLOSE
CLOSE
ENTER TO SEARCH